COMMENTARY

Listen to Ocean Voices for an Equitable Ocean Decade

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ABSTRACT

Equity is fundamental to the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (UN Ocean Decade), as reflected in Challenges 9 and 10 (regarding equitable access to data, knowledge, and technology, and catering to multiple values of the ocean for human well-being). The relationship between humans and oceans is often unsustainable, unstable, and inequitable. Marginalized ocean-dependent communities remain most at risk from ocean shocks, exploitation, climate change, and injustice. Yet more data or better technology will not automatically remove the barriers to a more equitable and sustainable ocean future. Contrary to well-intended initiatives, ocean science and technology may be used, misused, or ignored in ways that undermine sustainability or perpetuate inequity and inequality. As expectations grow for technological advancement to provide sustainable solutions to the myriad threats facing oceans and ocean-dependent people, there is a need for corresponding efforts to consider how science and technologies are designed and used, by whom, and to what end.

The Ocean Decade is a critical chance to move toward a sustainable and equitable ocean, but the pathways will not be straightforward. Imbalances hamper efforts to realize the vision embodied in the United Nations Agenda 2030 of “leave no one behind.” For example, many countries lack the human, financial, and technological capacity to undertake and utilize ocean science. Systemic, sectoral, and socio-economic barriers at national and sub-national scales hamper involvement in decision making and access to the required resources to develop and sustain local initiatives. There is need to recognize inequities, learn from failure, listen to the diverse voices of people who rely on the ocean for their lives and livelihoods, and value their expertise.

Achieving the transformation envisaged in the Ocean Decade places a tremendous opportunity and challenge at the door of all ocean stakeholders and decision makers. For example, “capacity development” is crucial to ensure that all can participate fully and fairly in the conduct and use of ocean science and technology. Similarly the “co-design” of knowledge, approach, and objectives is essential for the conduct, creation, and use of ocean science to be equitable, inclusive, and effective. However, both of these terms can be subject to varying interpretations and a lack of common understanding that can result in tokenism. Overcoming this challenge and meeting the goals of the Decade must be guided by the knowledge and needs of communities.

The Decade framing of ocean science to include not only natural sciences, but social sciences and humanities and traditional and local knowledge, is a promising foundation to upscale innovative approaches to address these challenges. For example, solutions-oriented research approaches can help guide the planning and conduct of research to meet the self-identified needs of
ocean-dependent people. Specific ethical frameworks can be deployed alongside technological innovations to address equity. A further example is ocean science diplomacy, which offers a framing to explore the different connections between national policy, international ocean governance, local communities, and science. Co-design processes and capacity development pathways can be usefully informed by critical perspectives from social science and humanities.

To advance equity in the Decade requires innovative approaches to how research is done and who is involved. First, networks are needed to bring people together to enable new ways of thinking, provide spaces to listen to voices that are not usually heard, and ensure that needs and knowledge from communities guide ocean solutions. Second, there is a need for research and innovation to identify barriers and enabling conditions for equity, and to develop and deploy actionable tools and technologies fit for community needs. Third, there is a role for people who champion transformative change and critical thought leadership, platforms where their voices can be heard, and places where ideas and diverse forms of expertise can be exchanged. Above all, there is a need for partnership and commitment to elevate the voices of ocean-dependent people and marginalized communities and advance knowledge, strategy, and governance frameworks that enable all to participate in, contribute to, and benefit equitably from the Decade.

The Ocean Voices Decade Action was established by the Nippon Foundation Ocean Nexus Centre to help address these challenges and advance equity in the Decade. The program will conduct research, incubate ideas, facilitate critical discussions and networking, and convene capacity-building partnerships to identify barriers and pathways and enabling conditions for equity in the Decade.

How can the Decade advance equity? Now is the time to explore this question and listen to diverse ocean voices sharing perspectives and expertise.

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